

Letters

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The Question of Culture

The question of culture has made headlines in debates over the academic canon, cultural literacy, and multiculturalism. This year's Fellows Program, "The Question of Culture," will explore the development of the concept of culture through history and across academic disciplines. Nine faculty members representing five departments will meet weekly at the Center to discuss these themes. Letters recently met with the seminar's directors, Jay Clayton, Professor of English, and James A. Epstein, Professor of History, to discuss the historical and contemporary debates about the concept of culture.

LETTERS: Would you explain your motivations for designing a seminar on culture?

CLAYTON: The concept of culture is clearly one of the most exciting topics today for the academic disciplines. It is one of the areas in which different disciplines are thinking through their own principles most radically, and it is also the place where disciplines are beginning to think about how they intersect with one another. This is particularly true in the fields represented in the seminar: history, anthropology, sociology, and English and Slavic literatures.

Also, one of the things that is important about this seminar is that the concept of culture itself is undergoing a profound revision right now. We are at a jumping-off place for a new conceptualization of culture, and we hope that the fellows in this seminar can begin not only to think about how the term has evolved over the last one hundred and fifty years, but to help shape the way

in which the concept is used in the future.

EPSTEIN: I think Jay is right. One of the significant shifts in the concept of culture happened in the late 1950s and early 1960s, primarily in the work of Raymond Williams, Richard Hoggart, and Edward Thompson. These British authors diverged from an older idea of culture as high art, as culture with the big "C," as, in Matthew Arnold's words, "the best which has been thought and said in the world." These authors sought to re-diagram culture. In particular, Williams defined culture, in one of its senses, as a way of life, or the way life is experienced, which is what he meant by the phrase "culture is ordinary." Even in this new view of culture, though, the right/left political split is not very clear. Both the right and the left could be found decrying cultural decline and denouncing mass culture as stupefying, artificial, and polluting.

Today, we have a somewhat different view of popular culture which has been opened up to us by a focus on cultural meanings, systems, or practices of symbolic notations or signification. The boundary between high art and popular culture has been broken apart, mainly through cultural studies and anthropological notions of culture. Now, we tend to see consumer culture as not necessarily indicative of some downward cultural spiral, but as, in fact, a very important place where creative meanings are being negotiated.

LETTERS: How do you define the term "culture?"

CLAYTON: It is really one of the most interesting words in our

language. Raymond Williams takes it as one of the "keywords" of our time. What is most surprising about the notion of culture is that it seems to have shifted meaning at least three times over the last one hundred and fifty years. When one looks into the word "culture," one discovers that we have not had it for very long. Prior to about the mid-eighteenth century, the word "civilization" seemed to indicate everything that had to do with the human realm as opposed to the natural realm.

During the Romantic era, "civilization" began to take on connotations of overrefinement and artificiality—all of the things that the Romantics rebelled against. This new word, "culture," came into use to refer to the aspects of the human spirit that the Romantics valued more than wit, civilization, and civility. So the first use of "culture" is Romantic in origin and meant what we call "high culture" today, the realm of the spirit, of the intellectual life, and of art—the things that most people still think of when they hear the word "culture."

EPSTEIN: I have two reactions. The first is that, of course, the word has an even older meaning than the one Jay is talking about. It comes out of French and actually crosses the line between civilization and nature precisely because what it meant was organic growth.

CLAYTON: Cultivation, exactly.

EPSTEIN: Cultivation. The Romantic meaning of the word, by moving that meaning across that line, is also trying to mediate that line in civilization, something artificially created by humankind and therefore unnatural.

My second reaction is that even in the Romantic movement, "culture" has the distinction between high and low. After all, in the preface to the *Lyrical Ballads*, William Wordsworth already blurs that distinction, because Wordsworth, along with a number of other Romantics, thought of culture as the highest achievements of humankind. The Romantics argued that the role of the artist was to recapture the language of ordinary people and reproduce it at some heightened level by reframing it in poetry. Hence, the Romantic argument already holds what might be considered a rather ambiguous relationship between what we would now mark as "high" and "low" within culture. When you get to the mid-Victorian period and to Victorians like Matthew Arnold, you get a much firmer placement of culture as high culture.

CLAYTON: I agree with Jim completely. It is interesting that the *Oxford English Dictionary* cites passages from Wordsworth and Arnold as two of the earliest examples of this use of the word "culture." So Jim has traced the intensification of this meaning of "culture" as signifying high culture. I do not think that in Victorian England you would have found the phrase "consumer culture." Commodification and culture were seen as two entirely

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different realms. That moves us toward the second historical meaning of "culture" that we are interested in investigating in this seminar.

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the anthropological use of the word began to emerge. This more expanded meaning defines culture as all signifying practices, all aspects of human behavior that have meaning, or are in any way involved with ritual or symbol, which means that language is culture, the way we dress is culture, the way we form families and raise children, our religious practices, our eating habits, and our manners are all culture. For anthropologists, the Arnoldian notion of high culture is just a subset of this more encompassing meaning of culture.

What you find happening now in the third phase of the development of this concept is that scholars in the humanities, who once would have been interested solely in high culture, are now trying to integrate their analyses of artistic practices with a more anthropological definition of culture. This is happening most obviously in the field of cultural studies, which is probably the most exciting area of humanities research today, and is certainly the newest wave of humanities research. Cultural studies as a discipline is still emerging, but its area of studies concentrates on rethinking the boundary between what one might call the first and the second concepts of culture.

EPSTEIN: I agree with Jay that cultural studies is without question one of the most exciting areas of contemporary scholarly endeavor. But one of its weaknesses so far is that it has been very focused on the here-and-now and has tended to lack a historical dimension. One of the things that may be a part of this next wave of cultural studies is an attempt to give it more of a historicizing dimension.

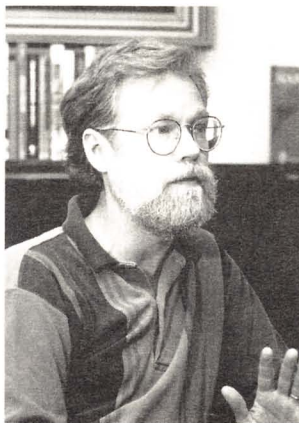
Jay's comments made me think of the problem of the historical

formation of academic disciplines, and the way disciplines get institutionalized. On the one hand, I suppose institutional lodgment—having your own journals, departments, conferences, societies, and all the rest of it—is one of the things that legitimates the practice of a certain discipline and gives its rhetoric a certain cultural capital. Yet sometimes, oddly enough, the most exciting work is not done within disciplines as they exist, but rather precisely at the point at which disciplines are trying to emerge and achieve the status that may stultify them. Cultural studies is interesting precisely because it is floating out there without necessarily all the things in place that would allow it to speak with a disciplinary guarantee that it is doing something quite legitimate and authoritative.

But returning to what Jay said, you could go back to where that anthropological view of culture starts. Someone like Max Weber, who is one of the first people saying that we live within webs of cultural signification, is seen as one of the founders of sociology. But what is interesting to me about Weber is the way in which he knows no boundaries. Weber is equally interesting talking about religion, the formation of the state, bureaucracy, and law. Sure, we know Weber as a sociologist. But what makes him a great thinker is that he did not really pay much attention to disciplinary boundaries, partly because the boundaries did not exist. The boundaries were in the process of being made. Perhaps that is why we look to cultural studies. We think of interdisciplinarity as a new and trendy thing. But what cultural studies is trying to do is to recover some of the liveliness

that got driven out of certain scholarly pursuits precisely at the points at which disciplines became disciplines. One of the reasons the Robert Penn Warren Center for the Humanities is so important is that it is a place where disciplines can come together and have this exchange.

CLAYTON: Thinking about culture is thinking explicitly about a concept that is not bound by any of the traditional disciplines. In none of the three acceptances of this term's meaning is it confinable to a single discipline. Even the Arnoldian definition of culture transcended the study of literature to include



music, the fine arts, some of the more inventive philosophers, and perhaps some of the more elegant nineteenth-century historians. The other two definitions are even less discipline-bound. The topic of the seminar represents something of a challenge to the organization of the university; it is the kind of topic that can best be explored in an environment such as the Warren Center, which takes as its mission the investigation of issues that exceed the boundaries of individual disciplines.

LETTERS: Are standards of authenticity and inauthenticity still relevant to analyses of culture?

EPSTEIN: Some notions of genuineness and authenticity are still tremendously important. If you look at the development of cultural studies and the way people have studied culture, you will see the search for so-called authentic cultures such as folk culture. There you have a notion that a culture is authentic because it has not already been touched by the artificiality of urbanization and, more generally, civilization. On the other hand, pop music or rock'n'roll would be seen as inau-

thentic because it is being sold. It would be perceived as inauthentic and artificial because it is commodified. Again, these kinds of distinctions are breaking apart now. But I suspect they still exist and have a certain political valence.

CLAYTON: The issue of the difference between authentic and inauthentic culture is a holdover from a Romantic conception of the artistic work and the word "culture." The very thing we see happening today is the breakdown of the validity of that distinction. In a postmodern world, the question of whether rap is authentic because it is the expression of a subcultural group or whether it is inauthentic because it is highly commodified by multinational corporations is the wrong one to ask. The impossibility of answering that question in any useful way shows how the interpenetration of capitalism through all aspects of contemporary society has made the distinction between authenticity and inauthenticity a less useful way to think about culture.

EPSTEIN: I would say that what we are left with then, after rejecting that distinction, is the debate over the extent to which we see the culture we now have as hegemonic in the sense that a theorist like Antonio Gramsci would use the term. This view portrays our culture as disabling because people embrace assumptions about certain horizons of expectation that do not allow them to resist the culture and politics they have. This view is opposed to the view that cultural productions such as rap music, for example, can be anti-hegemonic, and hence are ways of challenging dominant ways of understanding society, life, race, and gender. I suppose the truth could be some combination of these two views. But we are still left with that kind of question over the extent to which one can take up oppositional positions within this culture, or the extent to which it is so all-encompass-

EPSTEIN:

The whole question of what counts as a creative human endeavor needs to be rethought generation after generation, decade after decade.

ing, so all-powerful, so deadly in the way in which it has crept into our souls and beings that there is not this possibility of political change from within, that you cannot make music from within a consumer culture that actually challenges that culture.

CLAYTON: One of the most distinctive things about the third phase of the word "culture" is that we are no longer just talking about a change in the definition; we are also talking about a change in the nature of culture. That is, the dispute between literary critics, who were interested only in high culture, and anthropologists, who wanted the word to apply to all aspects of our lives, was an argument over definition. Cultural studies does not simply merge those two definitions; rather, it maintains that the social fabric has changed. That may explain why so much of cultural studies has been focused on the present, on the postmodern moment. People involved in cultural studies are often interested in this emerging formation of the relationship between realms of society that were once thought distinct. Cultural critics frequently reject the distinction between the economic realm and the social realm, and between both of these realms and the literary or artistic realm. Attempts to isolate one realm from the others, even for the purpose of analysis, seem false to the changing nature of today's society.

EPSTEIN: One of the ways the concept of culture in the postwar intellectual climate progressed also was a rejection of the notion of culture as a sort of residue, what is left over after you have the real stuff.

CLAYTON: That is right. In its crudest form, that was one of the consequences of the old way of thinking about high culture. After you had subtracted everything that mattered, like money and politics, then what you had left over was culture. But the distinction between the economic and the cultural realms is not the only

division that seems less germane today. One of the most astonishing things to people who have been used to the modernist scorn for mass culture is to see how irrelevant that category is becoming to people engaged in cultural studies. The notion that mass culture, such as film, television, and advertising, is radically distinct from high culture, which was a piety of a liberal, modernist stance toward culture, seems really irrelevant in a postmodern society. Some of the best video work being done today is taking place in Nike commercials, not just in performance art.

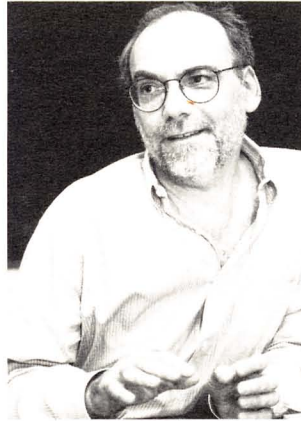
EPSTEIN: What the modernist stance consists of is what I would call the "gone-to-hell-in-a-handbasket" theory of the world.

CLAYTON: Right. We cannot be quite so pessimistic all the time.

EPSTEIN: It really goes to the question of human creativity and what counts as human creativity. The whole question of what counts as a creative human endeavor needs to be rethought generation after generation, decade after decade. Take something like the teenager's bedroom with posters of the Red Hot Chili Peppers, black lights, or whatever it is that today's teenager has decided to throw together as his or her collage of cultural practices and artifacts, as itself an artistic expression or at least an expression of a certain kind of creativity. It is something that is very meaningful. We may be out of sorts with it, but that is not to say it is not meaningful to your average sixteen year old, or that he or she is not actually making for himself or herself meaningful cultural worlds out of the cultural practices and artifacts of the present moment. Not to study that,

not to be interested, or to deny that that is being engaged in some form of creative activity is probably wrong.

CLAYTON: The trouble that most people have in seeing the teenager's room as an interesting cultural artifact is that they only have one conception of value which they can apply to a cultural



object. That conception of value is aesthetic value. So they look at the teenager's room and say, "This has no redeeming aesthetic value." You can argue against that and say, "Well, you, the adult, are just mired in an old-fashioned set of aesthetic norms and you cannot see

the true aesthetic value of this collage." That is one possible way to make a claim for the value of the teenager's wall as aesthetic object. But I think it is not a very useful response. You are not going to convince many people from another generation that the cultural interest of the room lies in its aesthetic beauty. That response itself falls into an old pattern of believing that the only way we can think about culture is in aesthetic terms.

Cultural studies would want to draw our attention not to the aesthetic characteristics, whether positive or negative, of the teenager's room, but to the meaningful, symbolic gestures that can be made by the teenager through the medium of this space, or the way in which the identity of the teenager can be shaped and altered by intentional acts on his or her own part so that you can think about the room as a response—a subversive response, perhaps—to normative pressures of a consumer society by the way in which the teenager revises the uses that these objects were intended for by their manufacturers. So that really if you study it

as a set of social actions, you see this room as a sphere of agency, as a way in which the individual can find room to maneuver in a world to which Marxists ascribe no room for individual agency.

EPSTEIN: It is a hard question as to what kind of politics this is. I do think the question of culture touches on the question of politics. It is hard to know exactly how to react to what has become a very fashionable response to the disappearance of a certain kind of civic space and civic discourse in our society. I have to say on the one hand, I share some of that concern. But on the other hand, listening to Jay, I think that people may just be looking in the wrong places for how the exchange, the dialogue, the discussion has changed and maybe it is just that one is going to have to look somewhere else for where and how that discussion is going to take place. Maybe it is going to take place in very uncomfortable sites of communication and in ways that we are unaccustomed to dealing with and listening to. But there may still be action out there. Furthermore, worrying about having lost civic discourse is probably not going to be an effective way to recover it. We may not have to be quite as pessimistic as some present writers suggest. So maybe the state of civic discourse will turn out to be a little bit more uplifting.

LETTERS: How do you view the issue of cultural literacy?

EPSTEIN: There is a line that goes from Matthew Arnold to someone like, say, Mortimer Adler, who argues that there are certain great books that can and should be taught. What defines a great book for Adler? I think he almost would answer in the same way that Arnold did: "the best which has been thought and said in the world." When Adler is asked what defines a great book, what he says is a work that can be read and reread for profit. His argument is an argument that it is patently obvious in a similar way that a philosopher like G. E.

Moore would say that we recognize certain moral precepts as good in the same way that, say, the color red is the color red. In fact, I think Adler would say that it is just obvious that Plato can be read and reread for profit, and it is just as obvious that, say, Mary Wollstonecraft is a derivative thinker.

Important to the issue of culture is the question of whose culture and what culture should be taught. It is a question that I feel conflicted about. On the one hand, I rather wish that students would read Shakespeare's work, and read it for profit, enjoyment, moral uplift, whatever. But on the other hand, it seems that when you discuss cultural literacy, you could say it is a bit like complaining that not enough members of Count Basie's band could read music. You are testing them on the wrong thing. It may be, for all I know, that the students who we teach know all kinds of things; it just turns out they do not happen to know all kinds of things about Plato and Shakespeare. It seems to me that an entirely reasonable response from any bright and rather cheeky eighteen year old would be to say that an adult who does not know who Snoop Doggy Dogg is is not culturally literate in this society. A lot depends on what you want to call cultural literacy.

CLAYTON: The actual phrase "cultural literacy" comes from E. D. Hirsch's book by that title. His conception of culture is much closer to the third definition of culture that we have been using. Hirsch does not think that being culturally literate means knowing Adler's list of the great books. In fact, Hirsch and Adler are diametrically opposed in the debate. Hirsch believes that it is important for thinking that one have command of one's culture. His is an argument about how the brain works, and he believes that in order to think cogently, one has to have at one's command the resources of one's culture. He is very relativistic about what one's culture is, and says that this is a

continually changing and shifting field. Hirsch's view differs greatly from Adler's, which presents a list of masterpieces that will only gradually evolve over the centuries.

LETTERS: What other contemporary issues are at stake in the debates about culture?

EPSTEIN: First of all, there is the canon issue, which has thrown the academy into the political limelight in ways that we are not always accustomed to. The issue of what is being taught and what counts for culture becomes quite alarming for some people. Because after all, universities are supposed to be purveyors of culture. Maybe people would say to a professor at a university that it is alright to teach film. The older the films were, the better the class would be. Obviously it would be culturally better if the films were black and white rather than color, and maybe even better if they were silent. There is a way in which culture becomes that which is almost archaic, and can therefore become a field of study. At a certain point, most people both inside and outside of the academy start saying, "No, that is not part of the cultural world that should be out there for serious cultural investigation, study, and teaching." But as Jay is saying, it is changing all the time.

CLAYTON: A second issue that is at stake in this seminar is the question of multiculturalism. Whether culture is a single, unified field or whether we should actually think of society as made up of multiple, overlapping, and sometimes conflicting cultures is an issue that is inevitably raised by the topics we have been discussing. In particular, the notion that America has and should have only a single, unified culture is dependent on the Arnoldian definition of culture. But even the second definition, the anthropological and sociological definition of culture, could be employed to construct a single, unified field, a structural whole which defines America, a single set of normative

ritual and symbolic practices. In anthropology and sociology today, that model of the unified field of culture is under dispute too.

EPSTEIN: That is an interesting and extremely important point that we have not talked about. Again it is very much bound to notions of politics and power. I would make two comments. The first is that the movement I was talking about that was largely British and that emerged in the 1950s and 1960s, despite its left wing politics, of course did impose in its own way notions of a cultural tradition. On the one hand, Raymond Williams opened up the field by talking about culture being ordinary, and also opened up literary tradition so that you could read the radical William Cobbett's *Rural Rides* alongside Edmund Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France*. But on the other hand, there was a notion of tradition. It was not F. R. Leavis's great tradition, but it still was a tradition, and the tradition equalled British or even English culture. But what is missed are elements of the relationship between that culture and other cultures in the colonial and postcolonial world. Edward Said, who is a great fan of Williams, is still quite sharply critical of him for his imposition of a notion of a unified cultural tradition. It was a cultural tradition, after all, that excluded the whole field of writing that was going on in places such as the Caribbean and India, and all kinds of things that could be thought of as part of, if not a cultural tradition, something that would still be important to understanding the character of Britain and the British empire and postimperial world.

The second point I want to mention is how important language is to all of this. It was only this spring that the Tennessee government moved to the idea that you can go to the Tennessee state driver's license office and take a driving test in Spanish. This is seen as a very controver-

sial issue, and relates to some ironic cultural views. Conservative forces in our country say that the very people who speak another language cannot treat it as their primary language, but must have English as their primary language. Now, you could say that in order to be full citizens and to participate in the society in which English is the majority language, people do also need to learn English. But at the same time, I do not think that is the actual position of the people who are putting on the ballot that English should be the official language of the United States, as if this somehow were in dispute. It seems very important symbolically to say, "English is the official language of the United States," because some people have this notion that there has to be a unified cultural tradition that is the collective "we," and if we do not have that, then somehow bad things are going to befall us.

CLAYTON: A final issue that is at stake is the future of culture. All of us are drawn to this topic because we are concerned about the ways in which our national cultures have evolved and are interested in helping to shape the ways in which they may develop. In a society such as the one we live in today, the definition of what counts as meaningful, what counts as valuable information, is essential. Since the concept of culture is one of the ways in which we distinguish between meaningful information and irrelevant information or white noise, our job of thinking about the concept of culture has very pragmatic consequences for the future shape of an information order. I hope that in the seminar we will be able to get into questions, for example, of the Internet and what the culture of cyberspace might mean for us today and how the culture of cyberspace forces us to rethink even the three definitions of culture we have already come up with, and perhaps points toward some unknown, new configuration.

Politics, Ethics, and Terror

JEAN BETHKE ELSHTAIN

Jean Bethke Elshtain, Laura Spelman Rockefeller Professor of Ethics at the University of Chicago and Senior Research Associate of the Robert Penn Warren Center for the Humanities, led an interdisciplinary seminar for Vanderbilt graduate students on "Politics, Ethics, and Terror" at the Warren Center this summer. In this article, she explains her interest in leading this seminar.

"Politics, Ethics, and Terror" brought together two recognitions—one salutary and hence to be applauded; the second regrettable and hence to be deplored. The salutary aspect was the scholarly one. A consideration of mid-twentieth century political terror through the writings of three extraordinary figures—political theorist, Hannah Arendt; writer and intellectual, Albert Camus; and theologian and anti-Nazi martyr, Dietrich Bonhoeffer—cannot help but be "interdisciplinary." What does this mean and why is it laudable? There are those devoted to their respective disciplines who cast a skeptical eye in the direction of the inter- or cross-disciplinary. They fear it means diletantism, a lapse into a scholarly grey zone where boundaries are blurred and distinguishing excellent from mediocre scholarship becomes more difficult. They fret that those who are not prepared to submit themselves to the standards of judgment that prevail in their own scholarly areas will take refuge in interdisciplinary activities and cry foul if anyone dares to evaluate them from the standpoint of a recognized discipline.

This worry seems to me misplaced. All interdisciplinary activities take as their starting point a discipline: one must be trained in something. And it is from this base that one launches oneself into other arenas with dialogue, debate, and enlightenment in mind. What do historians have in common with sociologists? Have political theorists anything to say to philosophers? Do stu-

dents of the novel offer insights to anthropologists? The premise, of course, is that the engaged scholar never stops learning and refuses to rest content with the view that a single method or epistemology or theory can do everything for us. The world, and the words we use to describe, understand, and explain it cannot be thus contained. Why not make the activity of scholarly engagement across disciplines a more robust enterprise? For it is only through explicit consideration of interdisciplinary possibility over time that we become capable of doing precisely what the skeptics insist must be done, namely, offering discernments about what are worthy, and what are less worthy, instances of interdisciplinary engagement.

But there was a perturbing dimension to the explicit theme of the interdisciplinary seminar I conducted this summer under the auspices of the Warren Center. It was there in the title—terror. In recent months, the *New York Times* reported that the number of people killed in the genocide instigated by the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia in the 1970s is at least two million rather than one million, as previously believed. In addition, there were stories about the recovery of bones and personal memorabilia, useful in identifying the dead, from mass graves in Bosnia. Taking the measure of the slaughters in Rwanda continues. Terror seems an ever-present possibility. Hannah Arendt's mordant and, it seems, prescient warning in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* seems apt: once something new, even if horrific, appears in the world, the chance that it will reappear must be considered likely rather than unlikely. How can we, or should we, prepare for such possibilities? This is difficult. By assuming the worst about human beings might we not bring about the very thing we most fear? What repertoire of civic possibilities is available in a given political order and culture that invites, or creates barriers to,



The Politics, Ethics, and Terror seminar. Front row: Andrew Fiala, Eliza R. L. McGraw, and Thomas P. Crocker. Second row: Michael A. Boden, Scott Zeman, Jean Bethke Elshtain, Ellen Ott Marshall, and Molly Hadley. Third row: Robert Oliver, Francis Degnin, Christopher L. Helminski, and Anne O'Byrne.

political terror, even genocide? What ethical wellsprings do we and others have to call upon to argue against those who would do harm on a massive scale?

These were among the questions that haunted Arendt, Camus, and Bonhoeffer. How could it happen? How did Hitlerism and Stalinism triumph? How can the human mind conjure up figures so flagrant—six million Jews killed in the *Shoah*; perhaps twelve million *kulaks* and others eradicated under Stalin? Arendt insists that refusing to get caught up in the totalizing and often deadly logic of ideology means an individual remains open to what she calls factual reality and the claims made on us by simple truths. She would be horrified by the presence here, and elsewhere, of "Holocaust deniers." To her, such fabricators of bogus political and scholarly claims are charlatans of the worst sort who cavil at the mountain of evidence arrayed against them and fall into the gullibility and cynicism she considers characteristic of one predisposed to embrace ideology.

Camus, writing before Arendt's great work on totalitarianism was published, warned of "logical

deliriums" of the sort that led French Revolutionaries to sever tens of thousands of heads from bodies during the Terror and that helped to set an historic precedent for the victory of History over the dignity of human persons. "What matters now," he wrote sadly, "is not whether or not one has helped to ease a mother's suffering, but whether one has helped a doctrine to triumph"—this in 1946 at an address at Columbia University. For Camus, presaging the later writings of Arendt and, among the living, Vaclav Havel, human beings in the last half of the twentieth century faced a crisis in human consciousness itself, a crisis that demanded our most lucid thoughts. The demands of lucidity are great for Camus, and include an unblinkered awareness of evil with a continuing affirmation of hope.

Although Camus, as an "unbeliever," rejected a theological framework, he and Bonhoeffer have much in common. Each had engaged and worked through the challenge of Martin Heidegger and Friedrich Nietzsche. Each repudiated arrogant anthropocentrism and the sort of theo-

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“History” and its Relation to Place

GORDON HULL

The 1995/96 Fellows Program, which was titled “The Apocalypse Seminar: Fin de Siècle, Millennium, and Other Transitions,” sponsored “The End of the World” graduate student essay contest last spring. Students from a variety of Vanderbilt programs submitted essays about different concepts of the apocalypse. Gordon Hull won the contest with his essay, “Kundera, Kant, and the Synsk Khanty: Thoughts toward Reading Benjamin’s Theologico-Political Fragment.” Mr. Hull is a University Graduate Fellow in the doctoral program of the Department of Philosophy. What follows is derived from his essay.

I would like to sketch some thoughts about one understanding of “history” and its relation to place. This sketch represents part of my ongoing research into the ways in which contemporary political values have acquired the meanings they have, even as these meanings are now taken for granted. Such investigation is timely not only in the context of discussions of Martin Heidegger’s “destruction of metaphysics,” Michel Foucault’s “philosophical archaeology,” and Mikhail Bakhtin’s “philosophical anthropology,” but also because much of contemporary discourse is pervaded by a sense of the end of a certain understanding of “politics” and “history.” Yet, if we are to proclaim the “end of history,” as Francis Fukuyama has done regarding the collapse of the Soviet bloc, then we would do well to understand what is said to have ended.

In Milan Kundera’s *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, when Sabina speaks in exile at a meeting of Czech dissidents and émigrés, she does so from a point outside of the dialectic of history, and thus apocalyptically. At this meeting, she already sees through the dialectical progression to a repeating pattern of marches and parades (for the Communists, against the Communists, for the liberation of Prague, for another

liberation of Prague, and so on); this repetition calls itself “history.” In April 1968, in events imaged by Kundera, the awkward synthesis of “socialism” and “a human face” was broken by a Soviet army that would not be sublated. Also broken was the arrangement that would lead Prague into a socialism with *any* face. In rejecting the émigrés, then, Sabina turns away from marches and from what might be called a devolutionary spiral: the synthesis of global utopia had devolved into the Communist bloc, and then into the understanding that socialism does not have to have a human face.

We may thus, in addition to the sense of repetition, mark a sense of dispersal in the wake of the march to build socialism, which is to note that the effort to build history, thought from a point outside it, carries with it a sense of dispersal, despite its own insistence on unity. Kundera’s image of marches and “identical syllables in unison” brings to mind Foucault’s observation that “discipline had its own type of ceremony. It was not the triumph, but the review, the ‘parade,’ an ostentatious form of the examination.” I do not wish here to discuss Foucault in any detail, but merely to mark a congruent moment in imagery: Foucault attaches “disciplinary” to the march, which suggests a sense in which it involves a conscious molding of events.

What these reflections suggest is that history, understood as disciplinary history—the effort to mold historic events toward a unified purpose—entails as its inevitable byproduct elements of its own nullification. There is something excessive to efforts to mold events into history. The full realization of this excess would mean the end of the effort, and therefore from the standpoint of history, such a realization must be thought as apocalyptic, an ending of history without its reaching fulfillment. So too, from the standpoint of this excess, from

the standpoint of events and characters which are not yet historic, becoming historic would be a similar sort of end, of an ending *as* excess by becoming, instead, historic. Therefore, whatever is involved in this byproduct, that is, whatever is involved in the generation of disciplinary history that carries with it its own nullification, emerges from either standpoint as a matter of an ending. What is at stake is literally the end of history and of the world it constructs. More precisely, what is at stake is the status of Kant’s claim that a “philosophical search to work out the general world history after a plan of nature . . . must be respected as possible and even as capable of furthering the purpose of nature itself.”

In Kant’s “Ideas for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Purpose,” we find an early and definitive formulation in which history has two essential elements. He writes: “history is concerned with giving an account of these phenomena [the manifestations of the will in the world], no matter how deeply concealed their causes may be.” First, a successful history presents an account of phenomena. Second, this account must be causal, perhaps not in the narrow sense of demonstrating the prior physical mechanisms that bring about a given event, but in the more general sense of providing a sufficient explanation for why one event occurs after another. Thus, such an account exists, and in it, events are construed as strung together in sequence. For Kant, history, in a general sense, is constructive. The bringing about of history in order to fulfill a natural purpose involves constructing a causal account of phenomena.

To return to Sabina and the sense of dispersal, we may also note that the excess to history is often “place.” Now is not the time to develop this idea fully, but perhaps an example will indicate it. When the Soviet planners

entered Siberia and encountered the “small [*malie*; the word also connotes inadequacy] people” there, they brought with them not only the things to “modernize” them, but also the things to make their tundral home irrelevant to their future lives. For example, well-insulated trains were introduced so that the Soviets could travel comfortably above the ice and snow. More subtly, the shamen, who constituted the spiritual link to nature, were outlawed in the Soviet march toward a Communist utopia. We should keep in mind that the word “utopia” literally means “no place.”

If the march toward the *telos* of history produces displacements and motions between constructed history and natural place, then, it is the awareness of these displacements that poses the greatest threat to the march and that can, in a literal sense, bring about its end. More precisely, it is the awareness that the separations are constructed and consciously maintained. That is, there has to be a Sabina to call for the end of marches, and in order for Sabina to be able to do this, she must not only be displaced, but also must exist and track her existence independently of her displacement. The most apocalyptic question, then, is the one that seems the most innocuous. It is the asking of “how did I get here?” To see the emergence of this question, we must now return to Kant.

What, briefly, is the *telos* of Kantian history, and what is the nature of the insight that allows one to ask an apocalyptic question of it? The first part is the easier to answer provisionally, which would be to say that enlightenment, understood by Kant as “man’s emergence from his self-incurred immaturity,” is a desirable end to the achievement of which thinking should construct history in order that “we might by our own rational powers accelerate the coming of this period which will be so welcome to our

descendants.” Kant’s emphasis on parturition and maturation suggests a thinking that is based on generation and construction, always looking toward the future. Growing up is not so much about where one has been—the “how I got here” question—but about where one is going—the “what will I be” question. One should also notice the moral weight Kant attaches to “self-incurred immaturity.” “Incurred” is a translation of *verschuldeten*, which implies not only being the cause of something, but also being guilty of it. This question is hence a rational one: guilt is the province of morality, which is the province of reason; Kant has thus already brought together history, reason, and parturition.

Kant continues that “for this reason, [that we might construct a better future] even the weak traces of its approach [*die schwachen Spuren der Annäherung*] will be extremely important to us.” Here we see, in a determinate sense, the emergence of shaping and molding, that is, of discipline. The more a shape is traced into something, the more that something conforms to its shape. Even the weakest tracings help to bring about the molding, because each contributes, however minimally, to the actualization of historic shape. Even here, there is a sense of construction at work as these signs and traces have to be drawn. The approach of the historic *telos* is a matter of inscription. At first, the inscription is weak, but there is a force to it nevertheless. Future drawings, that is, renewed philosophies of history, will strengthen the inscriptions and deepen the marks. Thus, the realization of the historical *telos* from historic events is brought about by the historic tracing itself. At the same time, however, it is the trace of the approach, and the approach has itself a sense of its own motion: it is an *Annäherung*, an approaching. It is the conjunction of these two motions that is crucial for Kant, for that is the sense

in which the historic and the natural are in some sense together. That putting them together requires a conscious act can be seen in a brief comparison of Kant’s and Walter Benjamin’s understandings of history.

As Benjamin says in his “Theologico-Political Fragment,” “the profane is indeed not a category of the [Messianic] kingdom, but a category, and indeed the decisive one, of its softest approach [*Nahen*].” We should note three things. First, Benjamin has here shifted the discussion from tracing to one of categories, which is to say that things are no longer a matter of construction but of noting and correctly analyzing what is already there. Second, the sense of Kant’s *Annäherung* (approaching), which as a gerund stresses the motion, has disappeared in Benjamin’s *Nahen* (approach). Benjamin suggests that the approach of the Messianic is already here, and not something which is itself a motion toward us brought about by our own construction. Benjamin’s transition points to the sense in which the Messianic kingdom is the end but not the *telos* of the historic, and hence suggests that the Messianic is apocalyptic.

Finally, note that the question of place, which is the question of the gap between nature and history, emerges as an almost necessary byproduct of Kant’s conjunction. Each tracing, each moment in which the *telos* of history is brought nearer by its motion toward greater determinacy, involves the creation of a drawing, a history. This drawing, however, is itself not historic—as Benjamin puts it elsewhere, “no fact [*Tatbestand*] that is a cause is for that very reason historical. It became that posthumously.” *Tatbestand* connotes both existence and place: it is a deed, an act; it is existing, which is to say that it stands at some place. For it to become historic, it has to lose exactly this character—it has to be part of the tracing. Each effort at inscription, then, each trace

from the weakest onward, slowly dislodges the fact from its place. For Benjamin, there is no reason to think that the relation between traces (*Spuren*) and approaching is a correlation or a linear one. That Kant holds them together points to the entry of a gap between nature and history; that this gap is the product of tracing points to the element of construction present even in maintaining the separation itself.

When we turn, therefore, to a transition from Kant to Benjamin, it is a transition in which the connection between nature and history is rethought. In this rethinking, history from the standpoint of tracing experiences its end. As the connection breaks down, so does the construction that holds it together, and with them the very possibility of history reaching its *telos* as the realization of a natural purpose. The question, then, becomes: what about Benjamin’s approach renders it apocalyptic? That is, what about Benjamin’s thought points to the end of history? Of obvious import is the issue of comportment, since the consequence for the historian in recognizing that events become historic posthumously is that, as Benjamin says, he “stops telling the sequence of events like the beads of a rosary” and rather “grasps the constellation in which his own epoch is entered with a completely determined earlier [one].” Two elements should be highlighted: first, the gesture becomes one of grasping, and not one of tracing. It is a motion toward something which is already there. Specifically, what the historian grasps is a constellation, which is to say that the structure as a relation is already there, and not created through repeated tracings. Second, the earlier epoch regains its sense of place: it is completely determined, independently of the historian’s tracing. In other words, this recomportment releases events *from* the historic *to* their places. In allowing the release, it thus makes possible the



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asking of the apocalyptic question, “how did I get here,” by restoring a sense of “here” independent of the historic *telos*. The historian thus, in Benjamin’s words, “establishes a concept of the present as the ‘now time’ in which splinters of the Messianic are shot through.” In other words, the recomportment is itself apocalyptic in the sense that it already allows the entry—experienced as a sudden jump and therefore as an end and not a fulfillment, that is, not as repeated tracing—of the Messianic.

Here we must be very careful to avoid a misreading. Benjamin is *not* indicating that the study of history should begin again from a new perspective. To do so would be to continue in the manner of construction, and to interpret Benjamin in this way would miss the reason his thinking is, from the point of view of history, apocalyptic. The march, after all, can accommodate new origins: these are antitheses, and their resolution is inherent in the dialectical process itself. Benjamin’s consideration proceeds from outside dialectic: it is a comportment to the past in a way that denies the possibility of having an original zero point or origin as first. The historian who realizes the incompatibility between the historic and the causal “grasps the constellation” of his own epoch and an-

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ANNOUNCEMENTS

Harry C. Howard Jr. Lecture

This fall, the Warren Center will host the second annual Harry C. Howard Jr. Lecture. This year's lecture will be given by Patricia Meyer Spacks, Edgar F. Shannon Professor of English



Patricia Meyer Spacks

at the University of Virginia. Professor Spacks' most recent books are *Desire and Truth: Functions of Plot in Eighteenth-Century English Novels* and *Boredom: The Literary History of a State of Mind*. Her lecture is entitled "Arrangements of Self-Love: Boswell and Rousseau." Professor Spacks will speak on Monday, September 30 at 4:10 p.m. in 126 Wilson Hall on the Vanderbilt campus.

Visiting Fellow

Susan Hegeman, Assistant Professor of English at the University of Florida, is William S. Vaughn Visiting Fellow for the 1996/97 Fellows Program, "The Question of Culture." Professor Hegeman's current project examines the interdisciplinary development of the concept of culture in the early twentieth-century United States. In particular, Pro-

essor Hegeman is interested in the deployments of "culture" by anthropologists, cultural critics, and artists. By examining the contradictions and frictions implicit in these deployments, she argues that we can come to a better understanding of the wider context of American modernism.

1997/98 Fellows Program

The 1997/98 Fellows Program at the Warren Center will examine the "Person-Centered Approaches to Culture." The project directors are Thomas A. Gregor, Professor of Anthropology, and Volney P. Gay, Professor of Religious Studies, Professor of Psychiatry, and Professor of Anthropology. Six Vanderbilt University faculty members will be chosen in addition to Profes-

sors Gregor and Gay to take part in the year-long seminar. The Warren Center will also sponsor a Visiting Fellow with expertise in the area of study who will play an active role in the program. Seminar participants will examine the extent to which personal worlds shape public experience and the degree to which personality and culture can be described and understood with a common vocabulary. The organizers welcome a wide range of topics, such as the relationship of myths and dreams, the impact of individual personality on historical movements, and the interpretation of artistic or literary traditions through psychological theories. Further information regarding both the internal and external application processes can be obtained through the Warren Center.

Politics, *cont. from p. 5*

centrism that invites quietism in the face of earthly woes and injustices. Bonhoeffer moves through a *theologia crucis*—a way of the cross—putting God, not triumphant but suffering, at the center. From this center, he asks his fellow Germans who had not capitulated to Nazism to admit their complicity in permitting evil to flourish. He would see "the world from below" and, in so doing, put himself in danger in order to try to stop evil from triumphing. Bonhoeffer understood full well that evil will have its due. But he insisted that it is the responsibility of each human being, especially the Christian, to prevent evil from having its day. His role in the anti-Hitler conspiracy led to his own death by hanging in the Flossenbergl Concentration Camp just a few days before its liberation by Allied troops. Bonhoeffer was thirty-three years old when, in his

words, he had come to the end but also "the beginning of life."

"Politics, Ethics, and Terror" put a magnificent political theorist, a writer and sublime intellectual, and a gifted and brave theologian into a conversation with one another. Perhaps, better put, we were invited to recognize the conversation these exemplary thinkers were in during their own lifetimes. But it did more: it required students to ask themselves questions about the nature of their own engagement with the world in and through the communities of which they are a part. After all, noted Bonhoeffer, "You can't be universal anywhere save in your own backyard."

History, *cont. from p. 7*

other, rather than finding a new *telos* or causal chain.

As these remarks suggest, there is much involved and much at

stake in what one means by "history" and its "end." Perhaps another brief example will serve to indicate the direction one might take in this regard as well as the relevance of these reflections to contemporary discourse. The Soviet Union of the 1930s involved the forced separation and dispersal of ethnic groups from their traditional territories in the name of "progress," "the workers," and "history." One was supposed to cease being "Kazakh" or "Russian" and to become "Soviet." On the other hand, the collapse of the Soviet Union has been presented as the end of dialectical history, not just in the trivial sense indicated by Fukuyama, but in the more subtle sense of the return of calls for a return to place. There are now groups in the former Soviet Union and elsewhere which assert claims to historic homelands, often by denouncing the "West," which is understood as "progress" and the "historic." One example is the conflict in

Chechnya, which suggests that the "rise of nationalism" is intimately connected with the "end of history." It is this connection that needs to be thought, if we are to understand either.

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